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Morgan Sturges

The University of Montana

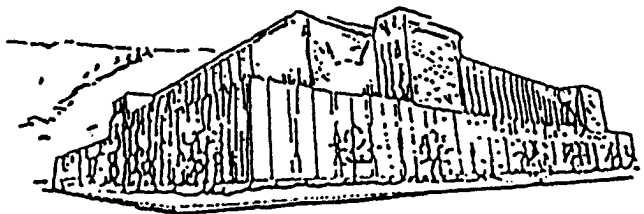
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On the Road with Missoula Children's Theatre

by

Morgan Sturges

B.A. The University of Montana, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

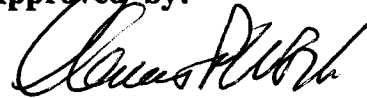
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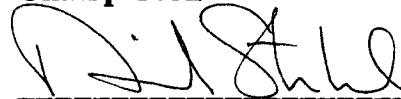
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1997

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by
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Introduction to Professional Project

Even at the start of my first year as a Journalism graduate student, I knew I wanted to do a piece on children for my professional project. First, I came up with the idea of focusing on a Missoula shelter run by Extended Family Services.

The shelter on 4th Street houses children who have been taken from their parents for one reason or another. Many of these children are severely disturbed from their emotionally-abusive and oftentimes violent upbringing. I observed the shelter for about a month and decided nothing good was happening there and this wouldn't be a surprise to anyone. Everyone knows about the horrors facing these children. If there is a story there, it is in the fact that the counselors and people who worked there can actually continue to do so.

While working as a reporter for the "Montana Kaimin," I wrote a story about Missoula Children's Theatre's 25th anniversary and thought it refreshing to do a story showing something positive happening in kids' lives. I am very active in MCT's in-town community theatre, and became friends with many of the tour actors and people on MCT's homestaff. Through these associations, I heard many stories about life on the road, kids and why you do it.

I looked up what sort of stories reporters had already written about MCT and found that all of them focused on the kids themselves or the final day--that is the day of the show. None showed the life of the tour actor, and none showed what happened during the week. I chose this as my project--the new way I was telling the story being what would make the story newsworthy.

A member of my professional project committee suggested that I write another piece with another audience in mind. So, I wrote a story for a children's magazine.

I think that my experience in theatre helped along the way. By doing a story on

something with which I was familiar, I was free to focus on other aspects of the process. I wasn't confused or perpetually asking questions that might have influenced the actors one way or another. Also, because of this prior knowledge, I could gear the story toward a drama or theatre magazine that would be uninterested in the basics.

The story is in as-I-see-it form, although you'll notice the first-person singular is deliberately missing from the piece. I tried to remain as behind-the-scenes as possible to avoid making my observations and opinions the center of the story. Admittedly there is not an abundance of analysis--I wanted to show, not tell. Hopefully, my reporting and the anecdotes told to me are "telling" in and of themselves.

EDS - MCT spells "theatre" with an "-re" so I kept the spelling consistent throughout. Also "townskids" is one word, according to the script of "The Pied Piper."

Day 1 - Monday - Auditions

On a dismal, snowy March afternoon, 100 kids gleefully group together in anxious hopes of being chosen to be part of a play, "The Pied Piper." Mothers line the walls holding winter jackets and lunch boxes. The cacophony of childish shrieks and giggles fills the room, while the children wait for the audition to begin.

Even in a room as big as this gymnasium, 100 kids seem like a lot. There are only 50 roles, including three assistant directors. For Helen Lindberg, it is the hardest day of the week: Many kids will be disappointed.

Helen and her partner, Eric A. Martin, comprise one of more than 21 tour teams (consisting of two actors per team) travelling throughout the United States, Canada and Japan with Missoula Children's Theatre. Their job is to introduce children to acting and the theater, with an added goal of building self-confidence and friendships along the way. The tour is 32 weeks long and this week the actors are at Target Range School, a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school on the outskirts of Missoula, Mont. Although this week is in MCT's hometown of Missoula, it will be just like any other on the road. The actors just came from Wallace, Idaho. Next week they will be in Philipsburg, Mont.

MCT is the biggest touring children's theatre in the world - and it is the only one that focuses on rural communities. MCT presents children's entertainment with a twist: the kids themselves are in the shows. Prairie Fire Children's Theatre of Minnesota is the only other touring children's theatre that uses the same formula of kids in the shows. And according to MCT Production Coordinator Joe Martinez, two former MCT tour actors started Prairie Fire. (Now parting tour actors must sign a contract agreeing not to start a business using MCT's ideas for at least three years.) The children audition, rehearse, and

perform during one week. The teams bring live theatre to small towns where often there is none. For the children involved, MCT's visit is an important and exciting week.

Helen and Eric weed out a few kids right away, explaining that those chosen will need to commit to roughly five hours a day each day until Saturday and performances Saturday afternoon and evening.

"If you can't make it to even one of these times," Helen says, "you can't be in our play."

"We'll turn our backs," says Eric, "so no one has to be embarrassed if they leave."

Seven kids get up (next week is spring break) and one mother fetches her two children.

Eric looks out into the crowd of young faces. "We're looking for people to be rats, cooks, council members, townskids, and of course the Pied Piper," he says. "We're also looking for three assistant directors who will help out backstage."

"The Pied Piper" is a revamped original musical based on the classic tale and written by MCT's Executive Director Jim Caron. As in the story, the mayor and town council of Hamelin Town hire a magical piper to get rid of the town's rat problem. After the rats follow the piper and his music away from the town, the townspeople decide not to pay him what was promised. In retaliation, the piper performs the same magical feat on the town's children and pipes them away into the hills. In the original story the children don't return. In this version, they do. The children will play all the roles except the narrator, Sara, played by Helen, and the Mayor and King of the Rats, played by Eric.

What they are seeking in these auditions, the two actors explain, are "loud, clear voices," people with expressive bodies, and people who can follow directions. The kids are asked to line up in height order forming a big square. The shortest ends up standing right next to the tallest.

"Now we want each of you to tell us your name and age in a loud, clear voice,"

Helen says. "For example, I would say, 'Helen Lindberg, 27!'"

Traveling around each side of the square, the actors listen to the children. Some are too quiet, some too screechy, some overcome with nervousness. One girl looks at her friend next to her in shock as if to say, "What is my name again?" This process repeats several times, the kids being asked to act happy, then bratty, then angry. After this, each child is asked to repeat a few lines from the show.

As the audition progresses, Eric and Helen move the children from one part of the square to another or ask them to repeat a line. Some groups of about the same age are asked to sit together or to say thus-and-such a line.

"‘The Pied Piper’ is a musical," Eric says. "And while we're not going to ask you to sing a solo, we do want to hear you sing." The two actors start the kids off with "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and walk around the square, listening. After this, Helen and Eric meet in the middle to whisper to each other. The kids wait patiently, or talk to each other, or strain to overhear, or tug at their clothes.

The 14-year-olds do a simple march, Helen leading the way, and then a bow--as gracefully as possible. More gracefully than either Helen or Eric, Helen says. This is when the actors choose the Pied Piper, who in this show does not speak or sing, but toots on a pipe and dances.

The audition ends with the kids playing a follow-the-leader game while Eric and Helen quietly jot down names.

Finally, all the auditioners gather on one side of the center-court line.

"We do not have a part for all of you in our play," Eric begins. "Helen and I are professional actors and go to lots of auditions. We may or may not get called back, or may get a part in only one play out of several we audition for."

"Sometimes you're just not right for a part," Helen chimes in. "But that doesn't mean you're not talented. It just means that there's not a part in the play that's just right for

you."

"So," Eric says, "repeat after me: 'Upon my honor, if I am not offered a part with this production of 'The Pied Piper,' I will try, try again.'"

Excitedly squirming on the floor, the kids repeat the phrase.

The assistant directors are named first and immediately put to work. It is their job to hand out the letters the children must take home to parents. The letters explain all the details of the week: when rehearsals and shows are, what to expect and what the kids should bring.

Then the rats are named, the youngest group, ages 5-7. They stand up when they hear their name called and accept the letter from the assistant directors. Next come the townskids. One little boy, Kurt Skrivseth, who rides in a wheelchair, pulls himself up higher when his name is called, balancing with his arms to gain the extra height. Eric reads off the names of the cooks and council next, some squeal with delight or surprise. "Me?" shouts the girl chosen to play the Pied Piper, astonished. Eric hands out the rehearsal schedule for the week. Tonight the council and Pied Piper will begin rehearsing.

The auditions are over and only one out of every two kids has made it into the show.

The others drift off, saddened, some being comforted by their mothers. One mother tells her child, "Well, maybe they just wanted more seventh-graders this year." An eighth-grader says, "Well, that was just a waste of my life."

"This is the hardest day for me," Helen says. "I hate telling any of the kids they didn't make it. And now we have only 15 rats because one of the mothers didn't listen to the commitment speech at the beginning and they're going away for spring break." She sighs. "We could've cast someone else as a rat."

Flukes and Frosting

Originally meant to be a small Missoula-based theatre company, MCT is now a non-profit organization with a budget of \$2.2 million and an international reputation. The company celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1996 and continues to grow under the guidance of Jim Caron, who claims that everything--his moving to Missoula, and the idea of the touring children's theatre--was a fluke.

Back in 1971, on his way to a wedding in Oregon, Caron's peace-symbol-laden VW bus broke down near Missoula. While he was waiting for it to be fixed, he noticed an audition poster for "Man of La Mancha" at the University of Montana, auditioned and got the role he wanted. He says he's been waiting for that part for his VW ever since.

Along with co-founder Don Collins who now lives in Seattle, and with a one-year budget of \$5,000, Caron produced MCT's first show, a version of Aesop's "Androcles and the Lion." Back then, he says, MCT was doing plays for children, not with children.

"For a couple of years we toured the state," Caron recounts. "We were doing 'Snow White' in Missoula, using local schoolkids for dwarfs, and we got a call from Miles City. They wanted 'Snow White' and we jumped on it...and then we realized that seven of our actors were in the 4th grade."

Because he couldn't ask the dwarfs to travel so far, Caron notified the school in Miles City (about 486 miles east of Missoula) that they needed kids to be dwarfs. When they arrived at the auditorium, 450 kids were waiting to audition.

"We thought, 'Hmmm, we may have something here.' We started wondering if this couldn't be done on a bigger scale where we would do a whole show in a week with just a couple of MCT actors and the rest from the community."

The ideals behind MCT, however, are not just about doing a show, Caron says. "Offering kids the opportunity to learn how to act is the frosting on the cake. The substance of what we do is teaching life skills--social and communication skills and

developing self-esteem. That's it in a nutshell. We give a sense of work ethic, that if you work hard on something you get a pay-off.

"Yeah, we've had a couple or three make it to Broadway, or we see them in movies once in a while. But the real deal for us is when we find out that a kid got his first job because he could stand up and be articulate in front of an employer. Or when we find out that someone has decided to be a teacher because they liked being involved with younger kids. That's our victory. The rest is just frosting."

But the frosting is important, too, as many MCT alumni will tell you effusively. Eric Askeland was a rat in "The Pied Piper" over 15 years ago and credits MCT with changing his life. Raised in Simms, Mont., Eric has acted in professional summer stock theatre and is now touring Austria with the University of Montana Chamber Chorale--something he wouldn't be doing without that early MCT experience that taught him he could sing, he says.

Also on the same European tour is Russ Lewis, a Missoula native who started with MCT when he was 6 years old. He is now finishing one B.A. in Drama and one in Music and Vocal Performance.

"Without MCT I wouldn't have been steered toward performing arts," he says. "It affected my life entirely. It affected the only career decision I ever made."

Karen Garfein is another example of that kind of career decision. When she was 11 years old, Karen was cast as the lead in MCT's "The Fisherman and His Wife" back in Yakima, Wash. She claims that it is because of MCT's influence that she is pursuing an education degree with a minor in child psychology. She wants to be a tour actress then a teacher. Sure she dreams of Broadway, she says, but MCT made her dream not only of her success but of the success of children she might teach.

"I was always an energetic child," Karen says. "But MCT made me aware of my talents. To be proud of being energetic and good at being on stage."

"I grew up at MCT," she says.

Monday Evening - First Rehearsals

The first rehearsal with the council makes Eric's command evident: he knows this show inside out--every line, every lyric. He teaches the songs first by having the actors repeat lyrics in rhythm, then begins to sing. He gives the council their lines and shows the "blocking"--where and when to move on stage. Three long two-by-fours laid out on the gym floor indicate the space they'll be working in and the difference between on- and offstage. The children repeat their lines and concentrate and laugh. Eric explains the motivation behind each line, making sure the council members know what their characters are like.

"You guys are arrogant and snooty," he tells them, and the lines begin to zing with the kids' renditions of what arrogant and snooty sound like.

In another room, Helen teaches the Piper, while singing the music to the ballet section of the show.

Tuesday, Day 2 - Townskids

The "townskids" are the catch-all group, too old to be rats, too young to be council members or cooks.

Each is asked to be as bratty as he or she can be while saying in a loud, clear voice: "We're not afraid of anything--especially a little rat!"

As Helen teaches and at the same time auditions for which kid gets to say what line, Eric confesses, "When I'm at work, I have to be the grown-up. It's weird. Sometimes it's hard to remember I'm not one of the kids."

He turns away and says to two boys who are tossing a backpack around, "Next time that 'pack flies in the air, it's mine."

While Eric goes off to rehearse the council some more, Helen shows the townskids their on- and off-stage positions. A little boy raises his hand, looking down at his clothes. Before he can finish his sentence, Helen begins to answer. It is a question that is asked often: "Are we going to wear costumes?"

"No costume questions until Saturday," Helen states firmly. It's a line that will be repeated almost as often as any from the play. Moving on, she says, "Now we're going to do the 'Suite Sequence.' The what?"

"The 'Suite Sequence,' shout the kids.

"Make a big gesture," she directs, "one you'd make if you thought something was a bad idea."

"Are we supposed to be mean?" a child asks.

Tuesday Night - Out with the Tour Actors, past and present.

As with any job, get a bunch of co-workers together in a social situation and they inevitably start talking shop. In the case of tour actors, the talk centers on long drives, great kids, frustration, theatre, and acting.

At Missoula's Union Club, the tour actors relax over a beer and a cupful of peanuts--a staple at the Union Club and the reason the floor is littered with peanut shells. Eric and Helen sit next to each other and chat with some people from MCT's homestaff and some former tour actors who now live here.

Rob Lindley, a former tour actor who traveled with "Cinderella" for a year, tells the story of when his tour partner, a Southern woman born and bred, flipped their tour truck in the snowy wilds of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

"I had been teasing her about never passing, and she took an opportunity to pass on a winding, treacherous road," he recounts. "Next thing I know, my face is covered with shards of glass and the apple pie that had been a gift from our last home-stay, some idiot is

taking a picture of the 'How's my driving?' bumper sticker on the back of the truck, and the set and all our worldly possessions are strewn across the road."

Tonight the tour actors share other stories of their road-warrior lives. Everything that has to do with the play of the moment is stuffed into the covered back of a pick-up truck. Everything. That means black curtains, footlights, costumes, stage lights, and in the case of "The Pied Piper," platforms. Tour actors must travel light. Personal belongings must fit into one duffel bag that can be tucked into a spare corner of the truck.

Tour actors must be hardy and willing to work--hard. This job is not for the faint of heart or health, Rob says. Many long hours are spent either in a truck or in a rehearsal surrounded by bouncing kids. At Rob's audition at the Midwestern Theatre Conference, MCT's Valerie Lyons told the tour-actor hopefuls that this was "a hard life. Weeks upon weeks of the same show. Only one friend to talk to. Living life out of a duffel bag. If you want glory do something else. If you want to be a star go someplace else." Then she said, "Anyone who is not interested can leave right now." Rob says after four of the nine people left, Valerie continued, "Okay, now I'll tell you the good stuff. You really get to make a difference in kids' lives. You get to travel the country and teach about the arts. You get to be a teacher." Rob says she sold him.

Home-stays, the arrangements made by sponsors to house the actors during the week of production, is another popular topic. While some home-stays are less than perfect, others come complete with good food and cushy rooms.

Vicki Clark, a former tour actress who toured two 32-week seasons with MCT, once with "Snow White" and once with "The Pied Piper," said her favorite home-stay was in Rock Springs, Wyo.

"These were the kind of people who didn't believe in television for their kids," Vicki says. "So after dinner we'd play cards or visit--or sit in their hot tub."

Home-stays like that make the ones that are less-than-perfect easier to deal with.

The good home-stays result in frequent letter-writing between the actors and their home-stay hosts throughout the tour, they all agree. The bad ones result in friendly oneupmanship among the tour actors as to whose home-stay was worse.

The actors also share kids' success stories. During Vicki's first year on tour, she and her tour partner cast a boy whom the principal later warned her about. According to the principal, Danny was a crazy kid who went psychotic if you looked at him the wrong way and they'd better be careful.

But, Danny not only performed his part as a town council member in "The Pied Piper" well, he was an exemplary student.

"When my tour partner singled him out for having the best on-stage energy in front of the whole group, saying how good he was, I thought Danny was going to float off the floor he was so happy," Vicki says.

Everyone was surprised by Danny's "blossoming." Unfortunately, when Danny's parents saw the show, they said they were surprised because Danny "didn't do many excellent things." Vicki says Danny's face fell. Her tour partner tried to remedy the comment by saying, "Well, you can expect a lot of excellent things from now on."

Vicki hopes he was right.

During all the chatter, Helen looks about her with interest. She is a curly-haired sprite-like woman with the angelic face of a child. Away from the kids, the slight twang of her Virginia accent is more pronounced. She has a bachelor of fine arts degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, and studied at New York City's Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre. She got the job with MCT through the Southeastern Theater Conference, a large regional audition where actors can try out for several theatre companies at once.

Eric's college degree is in Vocal Performance from Adams State College in Alamosa, Colo. He was working with a company in Virginia City, Mont., when MCT

Associate Artistic Director Don Kukla saw him and asked if he wanted to audition. Eric did, got the job, and plans on another season of touring.

Helen and Eric have been tour partners since the beginning of the current season in September. They talk in the "we" form often, like married couples do, but they are not a couple--they just know almost all there is to know about each other. There are a lot of long hours spent together in that tour truck, traveling from town to town.

Since Eric and Helen are in their seventh month of touring together, they've worked out a lot of the kinks. By now they know not only everything about each other, but how they work best together. It's been a long process, but they're in a groove now. The two agree with what Valerie said at Rob's audition, it's trying to have only one friend around. "Especially when they drive you crazy," Helen half-teases and bops Eric on the head.

Wednesday - Day 3 - RATS!

Today rehearsals begin for the rats, affectionately known in MCT parlance as the "pee-wees."

The first question is: "Can I go to the bathroom?"

Yes, you may.

The second question is, "Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Let's all go to the bathroom," Helen says, grabbing hands and walking towards the door of the gym. "You don't have to go? Go anyway!"

Meanwhile, Eric is working in another room with the rest of the cast on the songs for the show. The same technique is used as with the council: rhythmic repeating, then singing. This is a more unwieldy group, however. The children sprawl about the band room, all wiggling arms and legs, while Eric pounds out notes on the piano.

Back in the gym with the rats, Helen arranges the kids according to age and height. The rats are full of energy and enthusiasm as they learn their on- and off-stage positions.

Helen explains what it means to be backstage. They cannot just be quiet. They must be silent. She listens to each child say, "I just love Limburger," and chooses one girl to say it in the show.

The rats meet an assistant director, the stage manager, an older student named Kelsey Kovatch.

They learn about "rat hands" and trances. "Rat hands" means the kids hold their hands close to their chests (one might also describe the gesture as puppy hands). "Trances" means the kids look blankly ahead as the Piper's music takes them away. Later in the rehearsal, one rat dissolves into giggles and can't say her line, "Meow!" After three or four tries, and with Eric's guidance, she finally succeeds.

Thursday - Day 4 - Everything begins to come together.

The entire cast is here today from 3:30 to 8. Now the kids can begin to see the shape of the play. Helen is still shaken by a minor car accident she had this morning. Although it is the middle of March, it is Montana, and the roads are icy and snowy. While on her way to pick up Eric at his home-stay, Helen's truck slipped off the road into a ditch. Fortunately, she wasn't hurt, and the truck needs only very minor repairs.

"I feel so stupid," she says, "especially after what we were talking about the other night, about people who can't drive."

In today's rehearsal, Eric and Helen prompt effortlessly while getting the kids from one place to another in the sequence, reminding them of their lines. "The Pied Piper" is now beginning to look and feel like a show, not just a random grouping of scenes and songs. After only 12 hours or so, 50 sprawling, squiggling kids are actually on their feet and remembering more than they are forgetting.

"Good trances!" Helen says to the rats as they follow the Pied Piper backstage (the area behind the two-by-fours). "That was really nice!"

Triumphantly, the formally giggly rat meows on cue without a hitch.

Friday - Day 5 - Chatting over lunch

Today will be similar to yesterday, improving the kids' performances, reiterating directions, adding bits. But right now, Eric and Helen are eating lunch at a deli in Missoula.

"Sometimes this job is really hard," admits Helen. Just a few weeks ago a little girl in the cast from another town was crying in rehearsal because her mother had been hit by her boyfriend. When that sort of thing comes up, the actors just have to deal with it, they say. Sometimes kids will tell them things they don't tell their teachers. But Helen and Eric are not teachers in the sense the kids are used to, and because of this they are not allowed to get involved. After all, they're only there for one week. Just passing through.

Helen has also struggled with illness throughout the tour. Being around kids all day and in a different town each week, you can catch every cold in the country, Helen says. Two weeks ago in Seattle, a former tour actress, Katie Evertz, was called in to do the show because Helen had lost her voice.

Another fact of tour life is living in a fishbowl. The actors realize they are being watched and evaluated, curious objects to the people of the small towns they visit. They are always mindful that their reputations, as well as the reputation of the company, are at stake, and they would do nothing to jeopardize either.

Although Monday auditions are the hardest part of the job for Helen, there is an up side. MCT's auditions give the tour actors a chance to pick the kid who is best for the part, not the most popular with either students or teachers.

"What is really neat," she says, "is that when we go to these schools and audition the kids we're a clean slate--we don't know anything about them."

Eric agrees. "Sometimes we'll give a kid a part, or get a kid to do something that'll

make parents and teachers see them in a whole new way."

The two say that they seem to have a knack for picking the kid who has auditioned and auditioned but has never been cast in a MCT show before. They don't mean to, they say. Maybe it's simply that the kid has learned to audition well by that time. Whatever it is, they are happy when it happens.

One thing you cannot do as a tour actor, they explain, is compare towns. "Each town is so different," Helen says. One town's kids may make a huge leap and still not be as "good" as another town where the children have more opportunities for singing and dancing lessons, for example.

It's very rewarding work, they agree, though not for the faint of heart or for prima donnas. You do it because you love kids.

Today is also the day that the actors will put up the set in the gym. The brightly-colored scene of Hamelin Town is painted on heavy black material stretched over plastic frames. Eric and Helen also must set up the lights, the sound system, the platforms, and the props. Each knows exactly what to do and in what order. The whole process takes about two hours.

Saturday - Day 6 - Showday!

The kids arrive at 11 a.m. They go over a few songs, brush up some scenes. Eric and Helen are already in their costumes, Eric as the ever-hungry Mayor of Hamelin Town and Helen as the orphan girl-narrator, Sara. Eric is thin and has to wear a fat pad on his stomach for the part of the mayor.

The rehearsal doesn't go so well; the kids seem tired. "I'm 25 years old and I look like a dork," Eric tells them, pointing at his costume, "but I still have energy."

Then comes the moment they've all been waiting for--costumes! Eric lays down the rules: no running, no crawling, no sliding, no complaining. "No one is going to look

dorkier than me," Eric says, "no one is going to be hotter than me."

The kids' costumes are in paper bags with their name and part scrawled across the bag in red magic marker. Single-file, the children scamper off to locker rooms to try on their costumes. Once in their costumes, the kids seem to know that this means business. Although still wiggly, they are more serious than before, paying strict attention to directions and advice.

There is one dress rehearsal before the first performance that day. It almost goes well, barring a few mishaps: The mayor's son and daughter forget to bring Helen's crutch on stage; A cook apologizes out loud for scrambling up her line.

After the dress rehearsal, it's time for makeup. The assistant directors apply it to the assembled cast, who are sitting in a large circle in the band room. The kids ask questions (see sidebar) about the touring life and about Helen and Eric. As with the costumes, the children's introduction to makeup only tends to make them more careful. Sitting in a large circle, the kids ask what it's like to be an actor and about on- and offstage tragedies. Some hint at pre-show anxieties, such as, "Have you ever gotten booed on stage?"

Showtime!

It is time for "places" and time for the last pep-talk.

"Show the audience the good show that you have," Eric says. "You've put a lot into rehearsal."

He shows the kids how to silently tell another actor backstage that they did a good job with butterfly claps. Patting your index finger and thumb together. And he explains "break a leg."

"In theatre, it's a tradition to say 'Break a leg!' he says. "It means good luck!"

Despite the children's entreaties to "break a leg," problems beset this first show.

About 10 minutes into the show the lights go out, leaving only the generator-powered emergency lights on. Without missing a beat, the kids onstage, the older "council" kids, continue on in the dimly-lit gym. The loss of electricity also means that there is no piper music for the Pied Piper. Helen sings it from backstage.

The audience's reaction shows they don't notice anything wrong. They laugh at the rats and applaud their children's work. The kids shine with delight, pleased that despite the power loss no one could tell the difference. (Later, during the second makeup question-and-answer period, one child asks, "Has there ever been a disaster during the Pied Piper?" Eric replies jokingly, "Weren't you there today?")

Backstage at the evening show, the cast is all a-twitter, anticipating what they hope will be a show free of technical mishaps. Each group sits in its own off-stage position behind one of the three black "flats," and each kid has his or her own space in the group. The rats sit cross-legged, twiddling their tails and mimicking the on-stage action. The cooks squirm in anticipation as well, and some even remember to butterfly-clap the group or person coming offstage.

Kelsey Schwenk, the rat who says "I just love Limburger," points at Eric who is changing into his King of the Rats costume. The change means it's almost time for their big number. Kelsey confides that this is not her first play. She was also a ballerina in "Pinocchio" last year when MCT visited.

What you'd expect to see backstage in a kids' show--fidgeting, whispering, and the like--is kept under control by stage manager Kelsey Kovatch. Her responsibility is primarily rat patrol, which she performs in good spirit. The rats remember to be quiet and attentive and listen to what is happening on stage. Still, these are 5-year-olds. One rat complains of a tummy ache and three others insist they have "tummy aches" too. And Elise Winn ("I was the one who said 'Meow!'" she giggles) is pulled back from the audiences' view by her tail, but that is the extent of the backstage drama.

Later, Helen says that it was the afternoon show that had the dramatic crises backstage. "One boy, the joker, had a nose bleed, so we're dealing with that, the electricity being off, and no piper music."

What the kids said - War stories

The two shows are over, parents and friends have taken photos and videos, and the kids are almost done with their week with MCT. As they hand in their costumes to Helen and as Eric begins to take down the set, the kids clamor around each other, talking.

"It was so much fun--I learned so much about the theatre," says Heidi Kahler, the assistant director who ran the sound. "The electricity went off and at first I didn't know until Helen started singing the piper part."

Joe Cik, a council member, says it was just as much fun as the other shows he's been in. He was the town crier in MCT's "Cinderella."

Kelsey Kovatch says that her job was a challenge because "All the little kids complained about being sick--but other than the lights going out..."

Gabrielle Brockett, who played the Pied Piper, says it was "the best part I've ever had. It was so much fun."

Like many of the other kids at Target Range, she was in last year's production of "Pinocchio"--as the cat. Gabrielle was picked to be the piper, Eric and Helen say, because of her grace in movement. Gabrielle says that she's had some dance classes, but most of all she loves to act.

So what happens now? A veteran MCT mom tells all

MCT productions are not just a flash in the pan, to hear Potomac's Bonnie Ness tell it. In Potomac, a little town about 25 miles from Missoula, MCT brought "Pinocchio" last year. Some people in this town believe so strongly in MCT that when it was cut from the

school budget Bonnie Ness organized a Bike-a-thon to make the money for two years. It can be expensive to have MCT visit. A school in or around Missoula pays about \$1,675 for one week. The farther away the school, the more it pays, up to about \$3,000 for a week on the East Coast. But for Bonnie Ness, it's worth it.

"I wholeheartedly support MCT," she said in an interview last year. "It's a spectacular organization."

This year Bonnie says the school got together and did another bike-a-thon bringing "Beauty Lou and the Country Beast" to Potomac. With a new baby in tow, Bonnie still raves about MCT.

"Our oldest boy has been doing MCT shows for five years," she says. "It's just great what happens in these productions. Kindergarten-through-eighth-grade kids really get along and go for a common goal."

"The kids just love it," she says, adding that her boy sings the songs from the last show until the next one comes around. "They look forward to it all year."

With the set down and the truck repacked for the next week, Helen and Eric reflect on the past week. The week at Target Range was just like any other week, they say, with the exception of its being in Missoula. Sometimes that makes it seem not as special to these kids, says Helen, since MCT is right in their town. However, Jody Petersen, mother of rat Sarah Petersen, says that her daughter hasn't stopped singing.

"She still is singing the songs in the bathroom," Petersen said. "The show brought out her little singing voice more. Before, she'd get embarrassed when she danced around or sang, but the show really opened her up and gave her confidence."

Petersen admitted that the rehearsals for the 7-year-olds were long and Sarah would get tired, but even so, Sarah loved it.

“The Pied Piper” is over now. The tour team moves on, the kids go back to their regular routines. Some things have changed, however. Sarah sings out loud for all to hear, and other small voices are raised with perhaps a little more eloquence, a little less fear. Maybe “The Pied Piper” did lead the children away after all.

Kids at Target Range school in Missoula, Montana, recently got a chance to be in a production of "The Pied Piper" featuring--themselves! The play is a part of the Missoula Children's Theatre Tour Project. It visits almost every state in the United States as well as cities and towns in Canada and Japan. The kids audition, rehearse and perform the play in six days, helped by two tour actors. At Target Range school, the tour actors were Helen Lindberg and Eric A. Martin. Let's follow the week and see what it takes to put on a play in such a short time.

Monday - Auditions!

Do you think you have what it takes to be in a play? Can you sing a tune or remember lines or dance? Eric and Helen wish every kid who auditions for the play could be cast. But the play has roles for only 50 kids. About 100 show up at auditions in the big gymnasium at Target Range. The half who will be cast will be kids who can carry a tune and can follow directions.

"The Pied Piper" is a classic children's story in which Hamelin town, over-run by rats, hires a magical piper to get rid of them. After the piper succeeds in piping away the rats, the mayor and town council refuses to pay him what they promised. In retaliation, the Pied Piper puts the same spell over the town's children as he did over the rats and takes the children off into the hills. In this version, the children return to Hamelin Town at the end. Children fill all the roles in this version of "The Pied Piper" except for the narrator, Sara, played by Helen and the Mayor and King of the Rats, both played by Eric.

"We're looking for people to be rats, cooks, council members, townskids, and of course the Pied Piper," Eric says. "And what we want are people with loud, clear voices and expressive bodies."

Eric and Helen listen to the auditioners say their names and ages in the loudest, clearest voices they can. They also have them sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and ask some to do a few dance steps.

Just before listing off the names of the kids who get to be in the play, Eric makes everyone promise, “Upon my honor, if I am not offered a part with this production of ‘The Pied Piper,’ I will try, try again.”

Finally, Eric and Helen read off the chosen names. They remind the kids whose names were not called not to be sad because as professional actors, Eric and Helen are never cast in every play they audition for, either. And they remind the kids that next year another MCT show will come to their school.

Monday night - Saturday morning

Every afternoon this week, the kids are at the school learning songs and blocking - where and when to move on stage. The youngest kids (kindergartners) get to be the rats the Pied Piper gets rid of. The older kids are members of the council, and the in-betweens get to be townskids.

The actors, who have the entire play memorized by heart, teach the kids the play. Eric and Helen teach all of the songs by having the kids repeat them, learning them first rhythmically, then musically.

The actors also teach all the movements on stage including the Pied Piper’s choreography, the steps of a dance. The kids learn where to go both on- and offstage and learn how to project their lines, to say them so as to be heard by the audience.

This sounds like, and is, a lot of work. But work is fun in the theatre and there’s a big reward...

Showtime!

At last it's time to do the show for family and friends. The kids put on makeup to make them look like the characters they play. (The rats especially like to wear the painted-on whiskers and blackened noses.) Each child gets to wear a costume.

The children sit and wait for the girl chosen to be stage manager to call "places." That means the children have to go to their off-stage position and wait for their entrance. While they wait, Eric and Helen give the kids a chance to ask them questions. (See sidebar)

Finally, it's time for "places."

Eric tells the kids to tell each other "break a leg." That's the theatre tradition of wishing a fellow actor "good luck."

The show is going fine when suddenly there is a power failure! Only the dim emergency lights on the ceiling works. But the kids continue, in spite of the dimness-- never missing a line. The electric tape recorder won't work so Helen sings the Piper music from backstage! The audience doesn't notice what must have been chaos backstage.

After the show is over, the kids talk over what happened.

"The electricity went out and at first I didn't know until Helen started singing the piper part!" says Heidi Kahler, an 8th-grader and the assistant director who ran the sound for the show.

Stage manager Kelsey Kovatch, another 8th-grader, thought the show went well, even though the lights went out.

Gabrielle Brockett, who played the Pied Piper said that it was "the best part I've ever had. It was so much fun."

And this was only the first show of the day, the matinee. They still have another performance tonight. Break a leg!

Sample Query Letter

Morgan Sturges
525 Cottonwood St. #4
Missoula, Montana 59801
406/549-8109

Mary Lou Carney, editor
Guideposts for Kids
P.O. Box 538A
Chesterton, Indiana 46304

May 12, 1997

Dear Ms. Carney,

What's it like to do a whole show in a week? The kids at Target Range School in Missoula, Montana know. They auditioned for and performed "The Pied Piper" in six days with the help of Missoula Children's Theatre.

Each week during the school year, hundreds of kids participate in a Missoula Children's Theatre production. MCT is the world's biggest touring children's theatre, providing children's entertainment with a twist: the kids themselves are in the shows.

MCT's 21 tour teams travel throughout 46 U.S. States and four Canadian provinces, so chances are MCT has been invited to many of your readers' towns.

I would like to submit a story about MCT's week at Target Range School for your features section. The story is written with your audience in mind and would fulfill a part of my professional project for my master's degree in Journalism from the University of Montana. The story is 920 words long, not including a 600-word sidebar, and can be accompanied by my photographs of the kids and the production. This piece is ready to be sent to you at any time.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Morgan Sturges

What the Kids Wanted to Know (sidebar):

About “The Pied Piper”

How did you feel when you did your first play of “The Pied Piper”?

Both: Overwhelmed.

How many performances of “The Pied Piper” have you done?

Eric: We’ve done about 40 performances. About two shows a week for 20 weeks.

Have you ever played any other part in “The Pied Piper”?

Helen: No.

How did you memorize all the lines?

Helen: The first week of work we had to memorize all the lines in the show and all the songs. We also had to learn everything about the show - set, props, lights. It was really hard.

What was the most embarrassing moment in “The Pied Piper?”

Helen: One time I had to make up a whole monologue because the sound board didn’t come in - it was both Eric and my fault - and I was stuck on stage thinking of what Sarah would be saying.

Have you ever kicked anyone out of the play?

Eric: Never.

Has anyone ever dropped out?

Eric: Unfortunately, yes.

Have you ever had to choose between two people who were equally good?

Eric: Yes, often, we have to make tough decisions. We can only have six council members, for example and maybe seven kids are really good for the part. That can be a tough decision.

Have you ever chosen someone to be in the cast and been sorry later?

Eric: Never.

Have you ever been nervous?

Eric: Yes of course.

Has anyone ever ruined your play?

Helen: No.

Has anyone ever messed up a line and someone had to come from backstage to fix it?

Helen: No, when someone messes up a line you just try and make do.

About being on tour with MCT

Do you like doing what you're doing - working with kids?

Helen: We wouldn't be doing what we do if we didn't like working with kids. It's what it's all about.

How did you get your jobs with MCT?

Eric: I was working doing shows in Virginia City , Montana, and one of the bosses from MCT came to see the show and talked to me about applying to tour.

Helen: I went to the Southeastern Theater Conference, which is a big audition in the Southeast.

How do you fit everything into the pick-up truck?

Helen: Everything is packed really tightly and really well. Everything has a specific place.

Do you get motels when you travel?

Eric: Sometimes we stay in motels, sometimes we stay with families - home stays.

What do you do on road trips?

Eric: One of us usually sleeps.

What do you do during the day when you're not performing?

Eric: We're always pretty busy. We do laundry, workshops, set up the set...

Do you stay until Monday or do you leave right after the show?

Eric: That depends on where our next week is. This week, we'll stay in Missoula until Monday because we're just going to Phillipsburg.

What was your longest drive?

Eric: About 15 hours. From Mission, South Dakota to Missoula.

Where do you mainly live?

Eric: Helen and I are on a nine-month tour. We mainly live nowhere. We both gave up our apartments when we started this job.

Do you feel bad staying in other people's houses?

Eric: We're really not there that much.

About Eric and Helen

(To Helen) Are you and Eric married?

Helen: No, we are not married.

How old are you?

Helen: I'm 27 and Eric is 25.

Where were you born?

Eric: Helen was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, and I was born in Germany.

How do you make money? Do you get paid to do a play?

Eric: Helen and I are professional actors, which means we get paid to act.

Does Eric ever bug you to death, Helen?

Helen: Eric and I spend a lot of time together. Sometimes we disagree about things, but we work it out.

Have you ever gotten booed on stage?

Eric: No.